Godly Play, the state of play: US, UK and Australia

*Godly Play is a language – a language to make meaning - to name, wrestle with, and make meaning out of our own existential issues of loneliness, freedom, death and the need for meaning.*

Jerome Berryman

**Overview**

In late 2009 a Godly Play study trip was undertaken by Judyth Roberts (Children and Families Ministry Consultant Board of Education Synod of NSW and the ACT) in the US and the UK to explore ways that Godly Play may be nurtured and implemented in the Australian church context.

In both the US and the UK Judyth met with leaders and trainers and discussed the history and development, the organisation, provision of training and resources and international links of Godly Play.

**Project Goals**

The primary goal of the study trip was to be able to reflect on these experiences and recommend to the Uniting Church in Australia ways that Godly Play may be nurtured and implemented in the Australian church context. If Godly Play is able to provide a powerful way to engage children’s spirituality, through a focus on scripture, ritual and worship, then it is important that we collaborate with others to develop a Godly Play network in Australia.

**Observations**

- **Organisation**

  The situation in the UK is a more helpful model. Godly Play was introduced in 1999 with a visit by Jerome Berryman. In 2002 Rebecca Nye and Peter Privett were trained as GP trainers in the US. In 2007 Godly Play UK was launched with its own organisational structure. It has successfully seeded Godly Play in Europe and Australians wishing to learn more about Godly Play generally travel to the UK and many have done the Core Training there. There is an annual Godly Play Lecture held at a different venue in the UK each year, with a thought-provoking lecture, lunch, discussion time and workshops.

  The only person paid by Godly Play UK is an administrative assistant, who is employed for about 5 hours a week to maintain the data base, oversee the website, follow up enquiries, organise the training and other similar duties. The trainers are paid from the cost of training and each event, including the Annual Lecture, is paid for by participants.

  Bowthorpe Community, a sheltered workshop, is the main supplier of Godly Play materials. It is one of several small-scale producers of Godly Play resources and there are several suppliers in Europe too. However, a ‘make your own’ culture is encouraged in the UK, facilitated by workshops to do so.

  The UK model involved forming a foundation with charitable status with a board of trustees and patrons. This has given the UK a valued credibility as the trustees and patrons are chosen from a range of religious, business and academic backgrounds. This has led to the development of clear organisational processes with regard to training, quality-control, research, data-bases and follow-up of churches.
• **Training**

The UK Core Training is described on their website as:

> Over 3 days (minimum 25 hours training) you will develop your practice and understanding of the art of Godly Play.

**The training follows an action/reflection model of learning.**

There is a mixture of trainer-led presentations in each genre, and participant storytelling presentations.

We work in a model Godly Play environment, with the opportunity to see a comprehensive set of resources.

Each day explores one of the primary religious genres of Godly Play: sacred stories, parables and liturgical lessons.

Workshops in the core module also cover:

* Setting up a Godly Play Environment
* The Theology of Childhood
* Your particular concerns and questions

The UK training is able to cover more material and allow more time for reflection, shared debrief and general discussion. The provision of residential options also encourages participants to continue discussions and browse the resources and books at leisure. At previous courses participants have included children's work consultants, clergy, teachers, head teachers and those wishing to make connections with Godly Play and adult learning.

Both the US and UK also provide ‘taster’ lessons or demonstrations, one-off workshops for existing players to share experiences and resources and selective train-the-trainer courses for people to become Godly Play Accredited Teachers. Finally there are web-based resources, particularly on the UK site, and Jerome Berryman's books.

• **Support**

Both in the UK and the US there is ongoing support for practitioners. Each course creates a group who are encouraged to keep in touch and share resources. There does not appear to be any organised denominational support but some churches lead regional support groups. People who have done training go onto a mailing list and are notified of further training and events. Resources and books are available to order on-line.

In the UK Godly Play North now supports people in the northern region with regular workshops and opportunities to make resources and share experiences. People are encouraged to join a web-based discussion group and to maintain links with the training group. It is recognised that telling Godly Play stories is a spiritual practice and practitioners need to ask themselves “How are you, in your own spiritual practice, engaging and reflecting in ways that keep Godly Play alive and dynamic and full of wonder for you personally?”
• **Context**

There is a marked difference in the church context in Australia when compared with either the US or the UK. The American churches of various denominations I visited were large, well-resourced and providing for large groups of children. The UK churches would seem to have stronger organisational resources. In particular the Church of England hierarchical structures enable large cathedrals to act as a resource to entire regions. Some of the people doing training with me in the UK were from house churches and small churches and were going to be adapting the material to work with small groups of all ages.

Here in Australia the Uniting Church has some large, well-resourced schools and colleges that could become centres of Godly Play. It is possible that some churches could focus on Godly Play, but generally the space and resources required, as well as the large commitment of money and time would preclude most churches from setting up classrooms. Most churches could incorporate elements of Godly Play to their work with children or adults but it is not designed as an outreach method, it is designed for the children who are already in the church.

**Recommendations**

*Jesus said “If you welcome a child you welcome me and the one who sent me.”*

**Short term (within 12 months)**

- Create a website and brochure
- Provide ‘tasters’, workshops
- Supply articles about GP to church publications
- Get GP on agenda at presbytery meetings and synods
- Keep a practitioner network or data base
- Support trips to UK for training
- Explore possible grants to support GP

**Medium term (2- 3 years)**

- Set up some GP classrooms, at least one per state
- Explore a GP Australian model adaptable to the Australian context
- Get GP material into church libraries, theological colleges and their libraries
- Work out an organisational structure here to nurture GP
- Link with international GP
- Launch GP in Australia

**Long Term (3 – 5 years)**

- Research
- Teacher training
- National Conference
Barriers

There will be barriers to the above. Clearly the original visit by Jerome Berryman in the 1990s was not able to sustain the Godly Play movement in Australia. If the Uniting Church is sure of the benefits of Godly Play, then there should equally be a commitment to support people who are interested in learning more. It may be that Godly Play will be provided in a spectrum; from an occasional story told in a way that reflects Godly Play principles, to a uniquely adapted form of Godly Play in Australia, (perhaps called something else), to the recognisable form of international Godly Play using scripts, resources and materials in a Godly Play classroom.

The barriers for many churches will be:

- No strategic vision for children's ministry
- Lack of money to get books and resources and training
- Children's ministry seen as fringe issue for parents, therefore lack of commitment
- Lack of children's space in churches, and security for resources
- Difficulty of adapting Godly Play training and practice
- Difficulties because of size of Australia – some communities are very isolated outside of capital cities
- Godly Play can be seen in a very limiting way as a great method of storytelling, but it can be so much more.

Judyth believes the absence of children from most of our churches is impoverishing them. We have failed to articulate clearly a vision for integrated children's ministry, for nurturing children's spiritual formation. Further we have failed to respond compassionately to the changes in society that are impacting on families, or recognise the failure of program-driven, 'info-tainment' methods which have resulted in the loss of generations of children.

We urgently need to find new/old ways of relating to children and their families and responding to Jesus' call to welcome them and share our rich spiritual heritage in ways that can be transforming to them, to the whole church and honouring to God.

*Biologically, adults produce children.*

*Spiritually, children produce adults.*

*Most of us don’t grow up until we have helped children to do so.*

*Thus do generations form a braided cord.*

Based on the report prepared by Judyth Roberts  December 21  2009